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Fr. Marcos A. Marcos/Helen Moussa/Carolyn M. Ramzy: *Marguerite Nakhla, Legacy to Modern Egyptian Art*. Scarborough, ON: St. Mark's Coptic Museum, 2009, 136 pp., 90 color plates, ISBN 978-0-9812726-0-3. Distributed in North America by the David Brown Book Company, by the publisher elsewhere.

The present book, published by St. Mark's Coptic Museum in Toronto-Scarborough, is divided into five chapters, four of which have been authored by Helen Moussa, curator at St. Mark's Museum and sociologist and one (Ch. 5) by the ethnomusicologist Carolyn Ramzy, a specialist of Coptic songs and oral traditions. The volume further contains an "Introduction" by Fr. Marcos A. Marcos (iv–vi), president of the museum's board of directors, an afterword ("Journeying with Marguerite Nakhla, by Helen Moussa, 112–113) and two useful appendices (Appendix I: "Marguerite Nakhla: Biography at a Glance", 114–115; and a very detailed and thematic Appendix II: "List of Reproductions", 117–135).

Published in 2009, it is the first monograph in English – as well as, to my knowledge, in Arabic or other languages – dedicated to the Egyptian painter Marguerite Nakhla (1908–1977), one of the country's first female artists; except an exhibition booklet in Arabic and French (1975),[1] no other publication deals specifically with her work. On the one side, this reflects the general situation of scholarship on modern art in Egypt in particular and the entire region in general. There are only few monographs on Egyptian artists and most of them rather pertain to the category of art criticism than to art history as it is academically defined.[2] On the other side however, even surveys on modern art in the country only rarely mention her: Liliane Karnouk in her *Contemporary Art in Egypt* and in the more recent *Modern Egyptian Art 1910–2003* merely lists her with other women painters,[3] and – as Moussa pertinently notes – only reproduces one work of her 1950s period, neglecting the already productive earlier decades (9). In what can still be considered the standard reference in Arabic,

1 *Exposition rétrospective et œuvres récentes de Marguerite Nakhla: du lundi 1er au samedi 13 décembre 1975 [à l'Atelier d'Alexandrie]* (1975): Alexandria [Egypt]: L'Atelier d'Alexandrie, 10 pp.

2 On this question, cf. for instance Elkins 2007: 5–6.

3 Karnouk 1995: 9–10; Karnouk 2005: 70–73.

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Eighty Years of Art in Egypt,[4] Nakhla is just named among several Alexandrian artists,[5] although one of her paintings illustrates the chapter.[6] Aimé Azar speaks of her in his 1961 *La peinture moderne en Egypte*,[7] but simply quoting the text he had already published in his previous book about women painters in Egypt.[8] Thus, Nakhla does not seem to be part of the "canon" of Egyptian art history, even if Subhi al-Sharuni in his 2012 Arabic language *Encyclopedia of Egyptian Fine Arts in the 20th Century* calls her "one of the most important artists of the pioneers' generation".[9] Was she considered too Parisian? That's what Azar's text could suggest, when he affirms that it was in the French capital that she felt at home.[10] This might have been a handicap for including her in a local narrative that is dominated by national considerations and by the search for expressions of a local identity. Or maybe because she was not part of one of the groups – except for the Atelier d'Alexandrie – that are recognized as having achieved groundbreaking work, and too individual in the conception of her work?

The decision of St. Mark's Coptic Museum to dedicate a book to Marguerite Nakhla goes back to a donation she made of six tempera on plywood paintings of biblical scenes, executed in what is defined as a "Coptic 'folkloric' style" (Ch. 2). The museum, belonging to Toronto's St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox Church, the congregation's oldest church in North America, opened in 1996, in presence of pope Shenouda III (43) and aims at "celebrating the spiritual and cultural heritage" of the community and at "preserv[ing] Coptic art as a living tradition".[11] The collection comprises Coptic liturgical objects like crosses and manuscripts, ancient and modern icons, Egyptian coins from Alexander the Great to our days, as well as a section of folkloric paintings, which includes Nakhla's oeuvre. This attribution might surprise, but it goes back to a definition she herself gave of her work in an interview to Fr. Marcos, where she qualified it as "folk art" rather than "high art" (14). On the museum's website, she is said to be the artist who

4 Iskandar et al. 1991.

5 Iskandar et al. 1991: 90.

6 Iskandar et al. 1991: *Waterfall Gardens*: 89.

7 Azar 1961: 220–226.

8 Azar, Aimé (1953): *Femmes peintres d'Egypte*. Cairo: Imprimerie française. The author describes the lives and works of nine women, Amy Nimr, Lucie Caroline Reiner, Margot Veillon, Marguerite Nakhla (pp. 30–35, with 6 reproductions of her works), Micaela Burchard-Simaïka, Cléa Badaro, Tahia Halim, Inji Aflatoun, Gazbia Sirri.

9 al-Sharuni 2012: 85.

10 "C'est à Paris que Marguerite Nakhla est chez elle; ce peintre authentiquement égyptien par les qualités spirituelles qui sont le propre de sa race, est attiré comme par nul autre lieu, par le Paris doux des mois d'automne" (Azar 1961: 31–32).

11 Museum website: http://www.copticmuseum-canada.org/, accessed 15/08/2012.

revived in the twentieth century the practice of Coptic "folk art", abandoned since the twelfth century.[12] Thus, curator Helen Moussa and Fr. Marcos A. Marcos felt that Nakhla's works were a highlight of the museum's collection, and deserved a publication putting them in a broader context; between 2004 and 2008, Moussa travelled to France and Egypt in order to gather the required material (v).

Chapter 1 ("Modern Egyptian Art, Context & Expression", H. Moussa, 1–12) gives a broad overview over modern art in Egypt, since its beginnings in the late nineteenth century to the present. Largely based on Liliane Karnouk's *Modern Egyptian Art*, it gives the reader some useful information, although a few errors are to be found (for instance, the Egyptian surrealists' manifesto "Long Live Low Art" was not "a statement against 'high' Western art" (8), but a strong reaction against Hitler Germany's disqualification of modern art as "degenerated"). It ends with a few paragraphs on specific Coptic endeavors in creating a modern iconography based on traditional themes (from Pharaonic motives to the art of the icon), following the establishment of the Higher Institute of Coptic Studies in Cairo in 1954 (9–10); this last part of the chapter is consistent with the conception of the book, since it situates the general development of modern art in Egypt in a more peculiar perspective.

Ch. 2 ("Marguerite Nakhla. Leading Woman Artist in the First Half of the Twentieth Century", H. Moussa, 13–42), based on rich source material, retraces the main stages of Nakhla's biography and artistic evolution. Grown up in a family of "devoted Christians" in Alexandria (13), Nakhla is said to have painted and drawn since her childhood, a motive often to be found in the biographies of twentieth century Arab artists.[13] After studying at the Fine Arts School in Cairo, she completed her education at the Ecole Nationale des Beaux-Arts in Paris (1934–1939), where she also obtained a teaching degree in drawing, and later on took classes in graphic arts (1948) and fresco painting (1951); she lived again in Paris between 1952 and 1954. Her work was appreciated during her lifetime and she held several exhibitions, both in Egypt and France, and obtained many national and international prizes and awards. In 1975, the Atelier d'Alexandrie organized a retrospective show of her work (17), on which occasion the already mentioned small catalog was published. Her work is multifaceted and comprises portraits, scenes of Parisian life (Fig. 2.4. *Café Pastiche*, undated), animal paintings, as well as Egyptian landscapes and genre scenes (Figure 2.8: *On the Way to Tuesday's Market*, 1965), but also depictions of modern life, like her paintings of

12 Accessed 15/08/2012.

13 This is said namely of the Iraqi artist Jawad Salim (1919–1961), the Egyptian sculptor Mahmud Mukhtar (1891–1934) or the Lebanese painter Mustafa Farrukh (1901–1957), all considered to be pioneers of modern art in their respective countries.

the main halls of the Paris (Fig. 2.17) and Cairo (Fig. 2.18) stock exchange buildings. Christian topics are present as well, as for instance the paintings she did on her trip to Jerusalem in 1943 (*Mount of Olives*, Fig. 2.1; *Chapel in Jerusalem*, Fig. 2.12). Stylistically, Nakhla's work shifted from a rather Impressionist inspiration in her early years to a more Fauvist-Expressionist palette in her later production.

Ch. 3 ("Biblical Scenes in Coptic 'Folkloric' Style. St. Mark's Coptic Museum Collection", H. Moussa, 43–60) describes in detail the six paintings owned by St. Mark's Coptic Museum, created between 1960 and 1974 and which had been shown in the 1975 Alexandria exhibition (18). Executed in the "Coptic 'Folkloric' Style",[14] they relate for author Moussa to a popular biblical culture in contrast to icons, where stylistic rules are very strict (44–45); not being consecrated, they are illustrations of holy scenes rather than liturgical objects. The chapter gives detailed descriptions of the single paintings, although one may regret that it does not relate them to the Egyptian art production of the period, when the idea of a return to authenticity (Arabic *asala*) and to the arts of ordinary people was common ground. The notion of a reference to the past civilizations of the country – up to the French conquest in 1798, which is deemed to mark the beginning of Westernization – or to folk arts appeared in the late 1940s with the Cairo Modern Art Group, and dominated production and discourse for about four decades. Nakhla's religious painting style, although strongly motivated by her Coptic faith, can only be understood in this context. In the 1973 painting *The Wise and the Foolish Virgins* (Figure 3.6) for instance, Nakhla has dressed her virgins in local clothes, a common procedure in Egyptian art at that time. A parallel to Nakhla's religious "folk style" can also be found in the church paintings and stained glass windows made be the Lebanese Saliba Douaihy (1915?–1994) since the 1950s, where references to Oriental Christian traditions are transposed into a modern pictorial language.[15]

Ch. 4 ("'Women in the Life of Christ'. Narrative Icons in St. Mary's Coptic Orthodox Church, Zamalek", H. Moussa, 61–94) describes twelve other religious paintings by Nakhla that had been commissioned by the Church of St. Mary in Cairo-Zamalek. Dated 1959, these canvases focus on women that played a role in crucial moments of Jesus Christ's biography. Although announcing the style of the later religious paintings, Nakhla was closer here, with her composition and technique, to the tradition of the Christian icon. Trying to establish a specific, Coptic *asala*, these religious works are stylistically and chromatically distinguished from her other paintings and remind us of the modern Coptic icons by

14 See also Moussa 2007.

15 Cf. Naef 1996: 165–166.

Isaac Fanous (1919–2007),[16] also in the collection of St. Mark's Museum. The chapter further describes two other paintings belonging to St. Mary's church in Cairo – St. Shenout (Fig. 4.4) and St. Mena (Fig. 4.5) – by Ragheb Ayyad (1892–1982), a prominent painter of the first modern generation, and the *Last Supper* fresco (1959) by Emma Kaly Ayaad (Fig. 4.3), which decorates the wall above the altar.

In Ch. 5 ("'Colours that Sing', Marguerite Nakhla's Folk Paintings and Coptic Non-Liturgical Folk Songs", C. M. Ramzy, 95–111) Carolyn Ramzy draws an interesting parallel between Nakhla's oeuvre and the Coptic tradition of *tartil*, or non-liturgical songs. In their strongly figurative language, she detects a possible source for Nakhla's inspiration, reflected in many of her compositions (even in profane ones) arguing that, similarly to *tartil*, Nakhla's canvasses try to render an everyday spirituality, not the official credo of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Although tied to tradition, they reflect a contemporary vision of religion and belief. Thus *Date Harvest*, painted in 1960 (Fig. 5.1), a tribute to the Egyptian *fellah* beyond religious affiliation, also plays on the date fruit which symbolizes the martyrs' strength in Coptic hymns; the red color, strongly emphasized in the canvas, stays not only for Christ's blood and sacrifice, but for that of all Coptic martyrs (99).

To sum up, it could be said that the book progresses from the general to the peculiar, i.e. after an introductory part on modern art in Egypt and on Nakhla's life, it focuses on the relation of her work as a modern artist with the Coptic tradition she belonged to, thus highlighting the museum's collection. Here lays the book's strength, for it shows the artist's involvement with her communal religiosity and stresses Christian motives and inspirations in modern Arab painters, a theme mostly neglected by Egyptian art historians. On the other side, this is at the same time the major weakness of the book, since it only partly (in Chapter 2) considers Marguerite Nakhla's non-religious work, while the subtitle – *Legacy to Modern Egyptian Art* – seems to suggest a more comprehensive monograph on the artist. Another point of critique is that the single chapters are conceived like separated texts, making it difficult to appreciate to its full degree the artist's contribution to modern art in Egypt and the importance of her religious paintings within her own oeuvre. One may also regret that no Arabic source material has been used. However, the book does not address exclusively a scholarly audience; and it furnishes valuable documentation – namely through a rich unpublished text material as well as through the thematic catalogue of Nakhla's paintings in Appendix II. It gives a broad introduction to the creativity of a modern artist who although being one of the first female

16 Iskandar et al. 1991: 210.

painters of the country – together with the younger Tahia Halim (1919–2003), Gazbiya Sirri (born 1925)[17] or Inji Aflatoun (1924–1989)[18] – had never before been the object of a comprehensive study and publication. The book should therefore be seen as a first step in the exploration of a biography that deserves more academic effort, not only as a contribution to art history but also from the perspective of women's history in twentieth century Egypt.

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17 Mursi c1998.

18 A book based on her memoirs and dealing mainly with her political activities was published in German: Müller-Berghaus 2001.